

Hall DJ, Hornsby D. (2015)

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In: Davies, W.V. and Ziegler, E. (eds.)

Language Planning and Microlinguistics: From Policy to Interaction and Vice Versa.

Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.105-127.

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Date deposited:

27/04/2015

Embargo release date:

01 June 2018

Top–down or bottom-up? Understanding diffusion of supralocal norms in France

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1. REGIONAL DIALECT LEVELLING IN FRANCE

For over a century, France has held a central place in dialectological studies. The richness of its traditional dialectal variation – what Gaston Paris once called ‘une immense bigarrure’ (an immense patchwork) – attracted the interest of Romance philologists such as Jules Gilliéron, whose *Atlas Linguistique de la France* (ALF), compiled with Edmond Edmont (Gilliéron and Edmont 1902-10), represents a major landmark for the discipline and continues to provide a mine of information for variationists. Recording in minute detail the findings of Edmont’s linguistic fieldwork in 639 villages in francophone Europe, the ALF inspired countless early twentieth-century dialect monographs and glossaries, while the latter half of the last century saw the publication of a series of works entitled *Atlas Linguistique et Ethnographique de la France par Régions*, designed to complement Gilliéron’s work and using his original fieldwork questionnaire, which attest further to continued interest in France’s regional and local variation.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century, by contrast, have been far less propitious for the French dialectologist. Part of the impetus for the ALF research at the end of the nineteenth century was a perception that local dialect forms were already falling into disuse, and needed to be recorded before they were lost completely, and evidence suggests that France’s regional languages and indigenous Romance dialects were indeed about to enter a terminal phase, which probably began with the First World War (see, for example, Weber, 1977, p. 77-9) and has advanced remorselessly since then. Recent findings from studies undertaken within the *Phonologie du Français Contemporain* (PFC) project (see Durand, Laks and Lyche, 2009) suggest that where localized forms can still be identified in regional

French varieties, they are generally obsolescent or recessive (see, for example, Pooley, 2006, 2007; Durand et al, in press): even that most celebrated of southern French regional markers, the retention of syllable-final schwa (for example *je plante une rose* [ʒəplantəynəkɔzə]), now appears to be losing ground as younger southerners align their speech with a schwa-deleting supralocal norm. Wanner (1993, p. 81, cited in Pooley, 2007, p. 61) has gone so far as to suggest: ‘Déjà les jeunes [méridionaux] parlent souvent un français parisien presque parfait’ (Younger [Southerners] now already often speak with a near-perfect Parisian accent). The result is what Pooley (2006, p. 386) has memorably called an ‘*Oïl* slick’:¹

Nowhere else in western Europe are phonological regiolectal features levelled to such a degree over a large area. [...] there is little evidence to suggest that new vernacular varieties are emerging. Projected overviews of southern, Belgian and Swiss varieties may nuance this view to some extent, but it cannot alter the fact that the *Oïl* French area not only covers around two-thirds of the landmass of francophone Europe and the majority of its population, but that it is expanding still further.

Regional dialect levelling (RDL), which involves the loss of locally marked forms in favour of those of wider geographical currency, is of course a widespread phenomenon in modern developed societies (see, for example, Kerswill and Williams, 2002 and Britain, 2010 for a discussion of its effects in Britain), but its apparently exceptional reach in France has surprised many scholars. As Pooley notes, the loss of ancestral varieties does not appear to have been (or to be about to be) compensated for by any notable development of regional or city-based accents as in Britain, and, as Lodge (1998) has pointed out, there is almost nothing akin to *Geordie*, *Brummie* or *Cockney* in the everyday French lexicon to denote regionally marked language varieties.² For Gadet (2003, p. 105-6), variation in France has passed, in

barely a hundred years, through three distinct phases, in which the regional, then the social and finally the stylistic dimension have been dominant. This rapid evolution is of particular interest because the arguments generally advanced to explain it depict France as a textbook example of the power of effective, and occasionally ruthless, language planning. *Jacobinisme linguistique* (linguistic Jacobinism), or centralized top-down pressure of an extraordinarily powerful kind, is seen to have promoted intervention by the state through the law, the education system and the *Académie Française* to engender an ‘ideology of the standard’ in Milroy and Milroy (2012)’s terms, which has overseen the near eradication of all but a prestige Parisian norm.

We shall present evidence that reports of the death of regional variation are exaggerated, and that the power of centralized language planning is likewise greatly overestimated even in the nation where its claimed effects are the strongest. We will argue that the early Republican dream of a monolingual French nation was achieved more as a result of France’s social and demographic peculiarities than through blind obedience of her citizens to Parisian diktat, and that new forms of geolinguistic variation are emerging in what might appear unexpected places. But first it is worth dwelling, briefly, on some common explanations for the apparently exceptional advance of a supralocal norm in France.

A central factor in the emergence of a monolingual French nation, for Lodge (1993) and Armstrong and Pooley (2010) among others, is a Republican ideology, dating back to the Revolution of 1789, which has traditionally equated languages other than French with disloyalty to the nation. As early as 1794, eradication of regional varieties was identified as a political priority in the *Rapport sur la Nécessité et les Moyens d’anéantir les patois et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française* (Report on the need to eliminate patois and make use of the French language universal) presented to the National Convention, and it is not difficult to find examples of the ferocious contemporary rhetoric with which France’s

other indigenous languages were condemned. Most often quoted is B. Barère, speaking at the Convention on 27 January of that year (Lodge 1993, p. 214, our translation):

Feudalism and superstition speak Breton, emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German, counter-revolution speaks Italian, and fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us destroy these instruments of damage and ignorance.³

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that linguistic prescriptivism runs deep in the French psyche, engendering considerable linguistic insecurity among those denied access to the prestige norm. But it is nonetheless dangerous to posit a direct causal link between national linguistic ideology and local linguistic practice. There is little evidence, for example, that the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts*, a legal document which in 1539 made French the national language for administrative purposes, had much effect on day-to-day usage for most French people, for whom a regional language or *patois* was the normal mode of communication at least until the early twentieth century. Conversely, the *Deixonne* law of 1951 was framed in a more enlightened post-war environment with the belated intention of protecting some of France's regional languages, but has done little to arrest their decline. Elsewhere, the relationship between policy and outcome has proved anything but straightforward: numbers of Irish speakers have dwindled in spite of strong state support, including compulsory teaching in schools, in the Republic of Ireland, while in Spain, Catalan and Basque have fared noticeably better than in neighbouring France, in spite of virulent state hostility to regional languages during the Franco years (1939-75).

An alternative version of the 'dominant centre' hypothesis, advanced by Armstrong (2001, p. 45), holds that it is the demographic weight of the capital, as much as the centralist ideology of its ruling elite, which accounts for the decline of regional variation in France. The Paris

conurbation, with a population of 12.1 million, dwarfs even its nearest rivals Lyon (2.1 m) and Marseille (1.7 m), and its influence is correspondingly greater than all other cities, drowning out other regional varieties. Thus, Bauche could already claim in 1920 that there was no significant difference, at least in French-speaking France, between the working-class speech of Paris and that spoken outside the capital (Bauche, 1920, p. 183). But the demographic argument fails to explain why London – on most estimates a larger conurbation than Paris – fails to exert comparable pressure on other British cities. How, for example, has a relatively small city such as Liverpool (pop. 1.35m) retained a highly distinct local accent⁴ in spite of being closer to its capital than, say, Lyon is to Paris? While major cities are undoubtedly influential, it is simplistic to assume passive adoption of city norms by speakers in outlying areas, as our own findings from two sites in Normandy, Darnétal and La Bonneville, will demonstrate.

2. THE NORMANDY STUDY: DEMOGRAPHIC AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

The historical province of Normandy⁵ has a single autochthonous Romance variety, Norman, which certainly has internal regional variation, but not enough to significantly impede comprehension. Demographically, on the other hand, there is much variation within the province, as will be seen below.

2.1 The demographic background

The study to be described here⁶ was carried out in 2006-8 in two Normandy sites (see figure 1), each named after a central location in its area. Darnétal is a depressed urban suburb of Rouen, with high unemployment; the site we are calling La Bonneville⁷ consists of eleven villages in the *cantons*⁸ of Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte and Sainte-Mère-Église, only one of which has a population higher than 500: together, their population numbers about 10,000, as does that of Darnétal.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Taking Darnétal first, a dearth of local employment opportunities has made it significant that the Rouen urban area is in fact closer to Paris (140 km) than it is to the other Normandy site investigated here (La Bonneville is 220 km from Rouen). The transport links are also much better between Rouen and Paris than between Rouen and La Bonneville. The significance of this is certainly economic – it is increasingly easy to commute from Rouen to Paris for work, so, all other things being equal, *Darnétalais* have either option. Rouen and Paris are therefore fairly closely tied in both logistical and economic terms, and these close ties may also engender linguistic significance: one of the linguistic variables investigated here, (e), appears to behave similarly in Rouen and Paris. Finally, it is worth noting here that, unlike isolated parts of the Paris *banlieue* (suburbs), Darnétal itself is not isolated from Rouen. The close connection between Darnétal and Rouen is also perceived linguistically by the inhabitants of Rouen, who see the Darnétal accent as typical of their city (Hall, 2008, p. 50-1).

Any similarity between Darnétal and La Bonneville really begins and ends with the fact that they are both in Normandy. The area comprising the La Bonneville site is rural and agricultural: most of the economic activity takes the form of dairy farming. There is no public transport between the villages of the area, as they are not close enough to a major town. Some working-age inhabitants of the area do use cars to travel to towns for work, of course, but the working-age participants in Hall (2008)'s study are not in fact among those commuters: of the 19 interviewees who were of working age or retired, only two worked or had worked further away than the next village. These speakers' isolation during their working life makes them good representatives of the way their area perceives itself. La Bonneville is in the centre of a peninsula (the Cotentin) with a great extent of marshland, and, during the winter floods

in these marshes, some villages are regularly cut off. The *Cotentinais* therefore perceive themselves as part of France, but also isolated from it, in contrast to the direct link with their capital which the *Rouennais* enjoy.

2.2 The linguistic background

2.2.1 The regional autochthonous Romance variety: Norman

Most areas of what is now France have regional autochthonous Romance varieties separate from Standard French (Lodge 1993, chapter 3, especially p. 72). For the Norman domain (Normandy and the Channel Islands), this is the severely endangered variety Norman (Lepelley, 1999). We propose that, for one of the two variables examined here, (a) (Section 3.1),⁹ Norman is a substrate which could plausibly produce the variation observed. It should be borne in mind, however, that possible Norman substrate influence on the Regional French of Normandy (RFN) does not imply that any speaker showing such an influence must speak both RFN and Norman: Norman is obsolescent, and most fluent speakers are probably now over the age of 80. It is very rare for substrate influences to be present in an area where there has been historical language contact, but where contact has now ceased; however, such cases have been found (for a summary see Sankoff, 2002, p. 645-66; Hall, 2013). We propose that RFN (a) is also a possible case of substrate influence long after the substrate language has ceased to be widely spoken in the area in question.

We have assumed that the substrate effect of Norman in each of our Normandy sites is similar, and that the local varieties of Norman do not differ significantly from one another.

While this assumption might appear contentious, it seems justified here given that lexicographers who study autochthonous Norman varieties stress their unity within a larger Norman whole:

[In Normandy] differences and ‘variants’ are apparent within a linguistic domain whose gross structural outline nevertheless clearly shows fundamental unity in the midst of diversity. This is why it is in no way ridiculous to talk about the presence of ‘dialects’ as parts of a ‘regional language, Norman’ – or, if you prefer, of a Norman linguistic entity. (Marie, 2012, p. xvi; our translation)¹⁰

Scholars of Norman and RFN (see, for example, Mauvoisin, 1995) typically divide mainland Norman along a North-South isogloss mentioned by Lepelley (1999, p. 46). Hall (2008) therefore selected a fieldwork site on either side of the isogloss, in order to capture possible differences between the RFN of these two areas, but, at least for the phonology discussed here, our research rather confirms the fundamental unity of the Norman domain. For one of our vowel variables, there are differences between RFN as a whole and Standard French, but smaller differences between the RFN of our two sites.

2.2.2 *Vowel variables of Hall (2008), and vowels of French and Norman*

Hall (2008, p. 20-1) investigates two vowel variables:

- (a): Whether the RFN of speakers and communities has two separate low unrounded vowel phonemes, /a/ and /ɑ/, or only one, /a/; and, if /a/ and /ɑ/ are still used, what the phonetic relationship between them is.
- (e): In stressed position at the end of an intonational phrase, whether the RFN of speakers and communities has both a mid-high front unrounded vowel phoneme /e/ and a mid-low front unrounded vowel /ɛ/, or has merged these vowels to [e] in this position.

In terms of linguistic theory, these variables are of interest because they show different relationships between RFN, Norman and supralocal French. For (a), most French except the

most careful styles now merges /a/ and /ɑ/ to [a]. Norman, on the other hand, has /a/ and /ɑ/ as separate phonemes for all speakers, and so does the RFN of many of Hall (2008)'s speakers. We therefore hypothesize that RFN follows the Norman substrate for (a). For (e), again, most French is less complex than Norman is – that is, many informal varieties of French now merge /e/ and /ɛ/ in phrase-final stressed position to [e], whereas Norman generally still distinguishes /e/ and /ɛ/ in that position. How (and whether) the distinction is realized depends on the variety of Norman – see Hall (2008, p. 172-73) for a summary – but what is important here is that most RFN speakers do not distinguish /ɛ/ and /e/ in intonational-phrase-final, stressed position, pronouncing both as [e]. (e) is therefore different from (a) in that, while RFN realisation of (a) may well be conditioned by its Norman substrate, RFN realisation of (e) clearly follows the surrounding French tendency and not a Norman substrate.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 shows the vowel inventories of (prescriptive) Standard French and Norman. These inventories are based on Fougeron and Smith (1993, p. 73-4) for French and Jones (2001, p. 27-9) for Norman. In the French inventory, /ɑ/ is bracketed because it is usually present in prescriptive accounts, but in fact it is not present in any pedagogical materials on the vowels of European French that the authors have encountered. The Norman inventory is that of Jones (2001). That study is on Jersey Norman, and is the only study to our knowledge which offers a detailed study of the vowels of any variety of Norman; however, the vowels which concern us here present no differences between insular and mainland varieties. Comparing the vowel inventories shown here with RFN as documented in this study will demonstrate that there is not a straightforward relationship between French, Norman and RFN which is repeated for

different vowels: the two RFN vowel variables investigated here combine the influences of (Standard) French and Norman differently.

3. THE NORMANDY STUDY: RESULTS

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The following section presents results from 48 speakers of RFN, sampled as follows:

- 24 were analysed from each site.
- Two styles of speech were sampled: interview style (conversation with the interviewer) and reading (tokens sampled from word lists, reading passages and gap-filling sentences, which would all fall under Ong's (2002) 'secondary orality').
- A total of 240 vowel tokens per speaker (table 1) were phonetically measured using Praat (Boersma and Weenink, 1992-2007;¹¹ see Hall 2008, p. 79 ff.).
- Speakers were divided into four age-groups: up to 19 years old, 20-44 years, 45-69 years and over 69 years old (for rationale see Hall, 2008, p. 64), and into four socioeconomic status groups – Lower Working Class, Upper Working Class, Lower Middle Class and Upper Middle Class – using a metric based on occupation and years of education, similar to those used in Labov's Philadelphia studies (Labov, 2001, p. 61).

The results presented are averages or proportions of the members of the relevant age-group or socioeconomic status group.

3.1 (a)

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 3 shows average formant values for /a/ and /ɑ/ in Hall (2008)'s rural and urban Normandy sites. The reference values (shown as 'norms' in the legend) are taken from published phonetic studies of 'typical' French of France and Canada: Durand (1985) for France and U. Laval (2001) for Canada. All vowel measurements in this study have been normalized using the Bark Difference Metric (see Thomas and Kendall 2007-12): the units are therefore Bark Differences (Z), not Hertz, but the resulting vowel-space charts can be read in the same way as conventional charts in Hertz. On both scales, normative /a/ would appear lower and fronter (further left) than normative /ɑ/. The Canadian values are included not because Canadian French is a model that Normandy speakers might be following, but because it is an example of a variety of French where there is still a clear separation between /a/ and /ɑ/, which is not true of any normative variety of European French (see 2.2.2 above). Hall (2008)'s key finding for (a) is that, in the RFN of both the rural and the urban site, speakers in all age-groups keep /a/ and /ɑ/ well separated. The separation is particularly clear in the right-hand panel of figure 3, representing the urban site, where arrows emphasize the separation between the /a/ and /ɑ/ values for two representative age-groups. Similar arrows could have been drawn between the two symbols for any age-group. Figure 3 also shows that, for all age-groups, RFN /a/ and /ɑ/ are raised in the vowel-space compared to the reference values.

Structurally, we can therefore say that RFN /a/ and /ɑ/ are clearly different from the conservative realizations of Standard French /a/ and /ɑ/ (because the conservative Standard French vowels are canonical low vowels, also illustrated by the Canadian vowels in figure 3). They are also different from the most common realization of these vowels in France (which merges them to a low central pronunciation, close to [a], as shown by the French vowels in figure 3). Crucially, Norman does maintain the separation of /a/ and /ɑ/, though the

surrounding French does not (no phonetic analyses of Norman are available at present, but speakers and grammars demonstrate that the separation is maintained). All age-groups of RFN speakers in both Normandy sites show a distinction between /a/ and /ɑ/ which is clear from phonetic measurements, even if it is not immediately clear to the ear: the distinction is present in Norman but not in normative varieties of European French, and yet the RFN speakers maintain it even if they do not speak Norman themselves. None but the oldest rural speakers in the sample are active speakers of Norman: the other rural speakers may hear it around them to some extent, but no urban speakers will hear it at all, as Norman has not been spoken in the Rouen urban area within living memory. We propose that RFN (a) is a case of a substrate effect persisting long after the substrate variety which is most likely to have contributed the effect has ceased to be spoken in the relevant area.

3.2 (e)

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

In RFN (e) – the maintenance or loss of contrast between /ɛ/ and /e/ in intonational-phrase-final, stressed position – the meeting of Standard French and Norman in Normandy has a different result. Figure 4 shows the average positions of /ɛ/ and /e/ in La Bonneville and Darnétal, and the reference values of /ɛ/, /e/ and /i/ from Durand (1985): it can immediately be seen that La Bonneville's and Darnétal's values are close to each other, and that relative to the reference values for French they are high, so that /ɛ/ and /e/ in RFN may both be realized between Reference French [e] and Reference French [i]. Crucially, also, in both La

Bonneville and Darnétal, /ɛ/ and /e/ are close to each other, so that in fact speakers in both places merge the two phonemes in stressed position.

Since merger to [e] is by far the most common treatment of (e) in RFN, the point of interest for this variable is not so much the phonetic position of the merged realization, but more the proportions of RFN speakers in each age-group who have a merger. Figure 5 shows these proportions for both sites, and for both levels of formality which are tested in this study: interview style, presumed to be closer to conversation style and thus the less formal of the two, and secondary orality, representing the style presumed to be used when reading out a word-list, a specially designed reading passage and a set of gap-filling sentences.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

A comparison of the two panels of figure 5 shows that our two Normandy sites do not have the same age-related pattern of merger, and we propose that the different social and geographical positions of the two are responsible for this difference. The crucial geographical difference between the two is their distance from Paris, and their ease of communication with the capital: the Rouen area, where Darnétal is, is 140 km from Paris, and there are direct routes by train and road, whereas the distance from La Bonneville to Paris is much greater, and there is no direct route (Section 2.1).

To take Darnétal first, there is a clear merger pattern whereby, grossly, older people are more likely to merge /ɛ/ and /e/ to [e] in informal style, whereas younger people are more likely to have the merger in formal style, and few people have it in both. As we saw above, the Republican education system has traditionally discouraged, if not punished outright, regional or other non-standard ways of speaking French. It therefore seems plausible that older people in Darnétal may instinctively avoid merging /ɛ/ and /e/ in formal contexts, since the most

formal type of French, which they would have had to use in education, keeps the phonemes very much separate. In informal speech, on the other hand, away from the critical ear of the teacher, these people have no hesitation in merging /ɛ/ and /e/, as is usual in the Regional French of their area, and also in some varieties of Norman.

Among younger *Darnétalais*, motivations are different. Educated in a linguistically more tolerant environment, their motivation to avoid a merger may be weaker, and indeed, they may well be conscious that a merger of /ɛ/ and /e/ is characteristic of the speech of Paris. Paris is prestigious, as the capital (and is nearby). Both because of the greater linguistic tolerance of their education and because of the prestige of Paris, which merges /ɛ/ and /e/, younger people may regard the merger as something to be done in more formal settings.

In La Bonneville, the pattern is less clear, but it can be seen that use of the merger in formal contexts falls off as speakers get younger. We therefore suggest that, in our rural Normandy site, merger of /ɛ/ and /e/ is still considered a feature used principally by older people, and thereby stigmatized as ‘rural’ (as the older people tend not to travel beyond their local area much). The fact that merger is a rural / Norman feature leads to its being stigmatized in formal contexts; the area may not have enough direct contact with Paris for the stigma to be mitigated by the fact that merger is also a Parisian feature. In informal contexts, meanwhile, rates of merger are high in all age-groups, as the stigmatization which may affect its use in formal contexts does not apply.

In both our Normandy sites, it is worth remarking on a pattern which is clearest for (e): rates of merger increase as socioeconomic status (SES) decreases, which is a common indicator of what Labov has termed ‘change from below’, summarized helpfully by Armstrong and Pooley (2010, p. 6) in the following terms:

In short, a social hierarchy is reflected directly in a linguistic hierarchy, and by derivation in a stylistic hierarchy. That fact of a variable being involved in change calls for another sort of account, since most change proceeds ‘from below’, that is from the adoption by middle-class speakers of hitherto working-class variants.

Figure 6 shows this pattern for both sites.

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

This pattern is clearest in our rural site, and in interview style as opposed to secondary orality-based styles, a pattern which is also expected for a change from below.

4. AN INTERIM CONCLUSION FROM NORMANDY

Our Normandy findings therefore suggest that, rather than being eradicated as the ‘extreme RDL’ thesis outlined in Section 1 maintains, regional variation in France is in fact taking on new guises. In both sites, /a/ and /ɑ/ have not merged as we might have expected, but nor have they retained the canonical values of the prescriptive norm. The open-syllable merger of /e/ and /ɛ/, on the other hand, has certainly taken place, but appears to be evaluated differently in Darnétal and La Bonneville.

It seems clear that change is happening in RFN, but we are of the opinion that the prevailing wisdom about language change in France – namely that the power of Paris is irresistible except possibly in France's other major cities – has led many previous commentators to seek it in the wrong place. Change has not been exclusively in the direction imposed by a stern linguistic authority, that is ‘from above’, though that certainly has been seen, in the shape of

suppression of autochthonous regional varieties in education to the benefit of French. For the /a/-/ɑ/ opposition in particular, change appears to have originated among the speakers of RFN themselves, and among the lower socioeconomic strata at that. France therefore may not be as much of an exception to general, worldwide sociolinguistic trends as has been assumed. This in turn raises an intriguing question: how have two relatively small settlements been able to resist pressure from a supralocal norm to which larger towns and cities have largely submitted? And, given that ‘top-down’ explanations for the remarkable convergence of urban French varieties in particular seem unsatisfactory, why does RDL appear so much further advanced in France than in Britain?

It should first be recalled that the supralocal norm to which so much of France has converged differs in some important respects from the prescriptive norm as (somewhat artificially) maintained and promoted by the education system. While the prescriptive norm maintains vowel oppositions like the two discussed above, many of these have been lost from all but the most formal styles in supralocal French. Few urban speakers, for example, still maintain the normative /ɛ/-/ɛ:/ opposition of *mettre/maître* (generally now [mɛtʁ] in both cases), or indeed the nasal opposition /ɛ̃/-/ɛ̃:/ (*brun/brin*: both generally now [bʁɛ̃]). Similarly, the normative /œ/-/ø/ opposition (*jeune/jeûne*) has followed the general pattern of complementary distribution for mid-vowels, in which the half-open vowel (/ɛ/, /œ/ or /ɔ/) occurs in closed syllables while its half-close counterpart (/e/, /ø/ or /o/) occurs in open ones. In other words, where supralocal French has diverged from the prescriptive norm, it has generally adopted changes of a ‘simplifying’ kind which are typically associated with high-contact zones, notably cities (see Trudgill, 1989; 1992). The /a/-/ɑ/ merger discussed above, for example, removes one opposition from the phoneme inventory, while the loss of the /ɛ/-/e/ opposition in open syllables replaces another opposition in one environment with a more easily learnable complementary distribution (see Tranel, 1987, p. 51-62).

Surprisingly, perhaps, there is scant evidence that these changes have been working-class led. Notably absent in major urban centres are the ‘changes from below’ which Armstrong and Pooley (see 3.2 above) view as typical. Why might such changes be so often stifled in French cities? An answer may lie in France’s urban socio-spatial arrangements.

In understanding linguistic change, Milroy and Milroy (1985) have stressed the importance of what sociologists term ‘weak ties’, namely contacts of a limited kind between members of different social networks, which create bridges between them. It is these often transient weak ties between individuals which facilitate the introduction of new linguistic variants from one network to another. Where such ties are numerous, changes spread rapidly, as ‘early adopters’ - often peripheral members of a social network - gradually introduce them to its core members. By contrast, close-knit networks characterized by strong internal ties but few weak ones (typically those of socially or geographically isolated communities) are less receptive to external, that is contact-induced, change. It is here that France’s urban demography, and the types of contact it engenders, are of crucial importance.

France differs greatly from the United Kingdom and the United States in its urban centre-periphery relationship, summarized by the sociologist Sowerine (1998, p. 25, our translation) thus:

The Anglo-American bourgeoisie fled cities in so far as transport allowed them; the French state deindustrialized cities and expelled the workers, in order to return them to the bourgeoisie.¹²

What amounts to a *de facto* segregation of France’s poorest in the periphery of its major cities has sometimes been a deliberate policy goal, the clearest example being Haussman’s redesign of Paris in the 1860s, undertaken partly in response to the uprising of 1848, which prompted

the displacement of most of the city's working-class population to the *banlieues*. On other occasions, the development of *banlieues* and *villes nouvelles* (new towns) has been a response to an acute social housing crisis, notably in the aftermath of the Algerian war, which saw a mass influx of migrants and the growth of peripheral *bidonvilles* (shanty towns) around major cities. The net effect in both cases, however, has been what Clark (1999, p. 46) has termed 'the unmistakable sealing and quarantine of the classes', in which physical divisions within conurbations mirror social ones. From the perspective of linguistic change, this might not be significant if contacts between centre and periphery occurred with enough regularity to generate 'weak ties' in significant numbers. In fact, the very opposite is the case: communications between *banlieues* and city centres are notoriously poor and commentators continually stress the isolation of France's poorest citizens on the outskirts of its cities. In November 2011, the *Economist* newspaper offered this bleak assessment:¹³ 'A sense of isolation prevails. It takes longer to go by public transport from central Paris to Clichy, 15km (9 miles) away, than to Lille, 220km to the north', which echoed similar observations by Noin and White (1997, p. 152-53), and warnings of 'la ségrégation par les transports' (segregation by transport) from Mignot and Rosales-Montano (2006, p. 25). In the Milroys' terms, the restricted number of weak ties between working- and middle-class networks continues to stifle 'change from below'. In stark contrast to the Anglo-Saxon model, in which 'inner-city' has become synonymous with social deprivation, French cities – interconnected by excellent transport infrastructure including TGV (high-speed train) links and *autoroutes à péage* (toll roads) – have become highly efficient propagators of a supralocal norm from which the poor are largely excluded.

Like the *banlieues*, smaller urban and rural settlements like Darnétal and La Bonneville, however, are often isolated enough from major centres of population to offer some resistance to the supralocal norm, and to diverge from it in unexpected and interesting ways.¹⁴ In their

maintenance of the /a/-/ɑ/ opposition, Darnétal and La Bonneville speakers appear to be reclaiming and adapting an archaic norm into a new local identity marker, in a manner reminiscent of Labov (1963)'s Martha's Vineyarders. Such changes attest to the power of speakers to resist rather than passively submit to external norms, and pose important challenges for variationists schooled in the tradition of modern urban dialectology. For while diversity in all its forms continues in France, the most interesting patterns are generally to be found away from the heart of the city where, since Labov (1966)'s New York study, researchers have become accustomed to looking for them.

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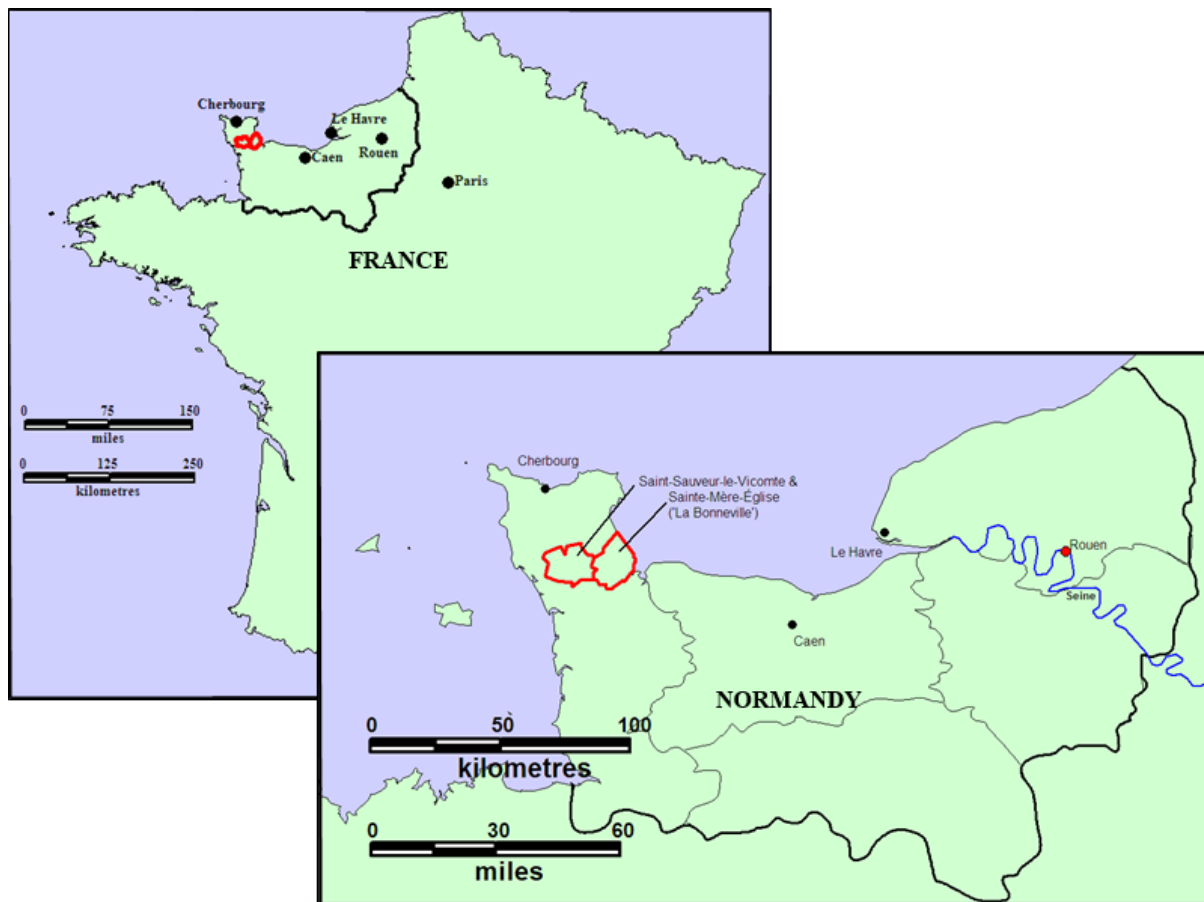
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Figures

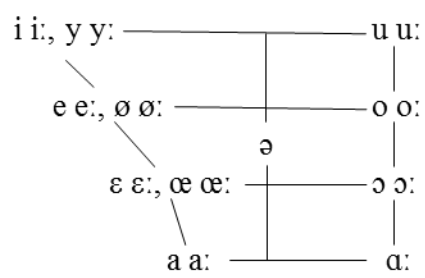
Figure 1: Location of sites for Hall (2008)



bold

Norman (of Jersey)

Oral



Nasal

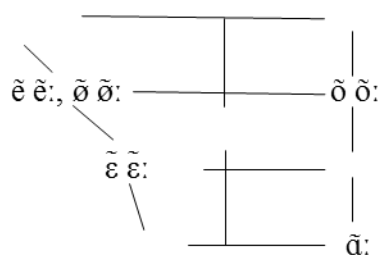


Figure 3: Average formant values for /a/ and /a/ by age-group in Hall (2008)'s rural (left) and urban (right) sites, compared with reference values for European French and Canadian French. Arrows are added to the urban chart to visually emphasize the systematic difference between fronter /a/ and backer /a/ in that site (they do not imply dynamic progress or vowel-change between the two vowels connected).¹⁵

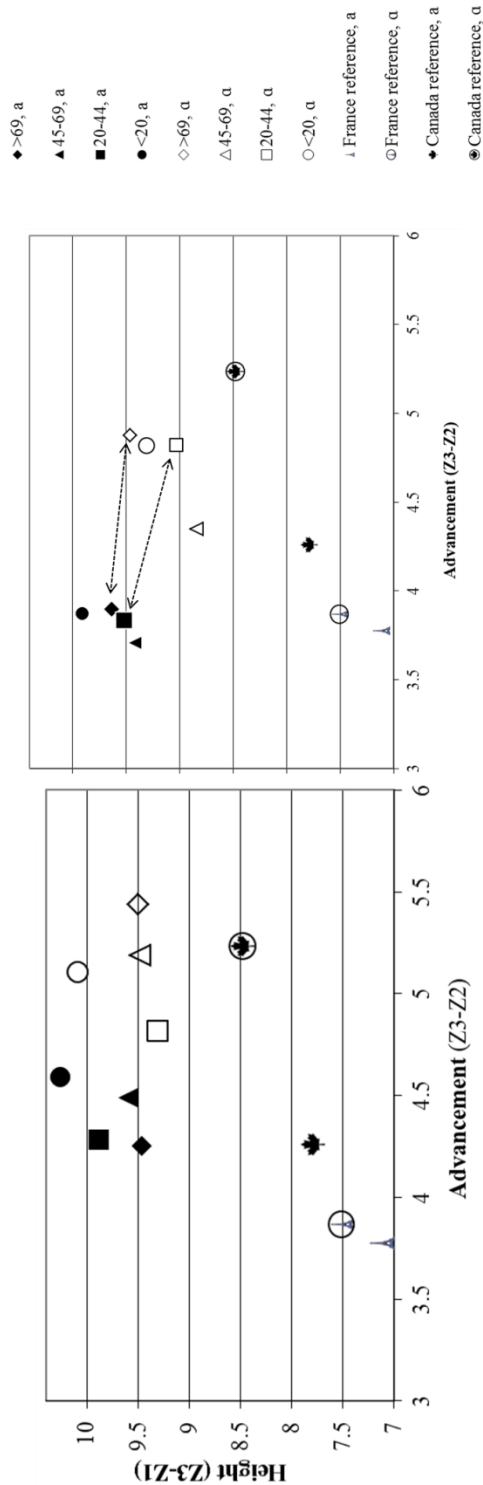


Figure 4: Average formant values for /ɛ/ and /e/ in Hall (2008)'s rural and urban Normandy sites, compared with reference values for European French.

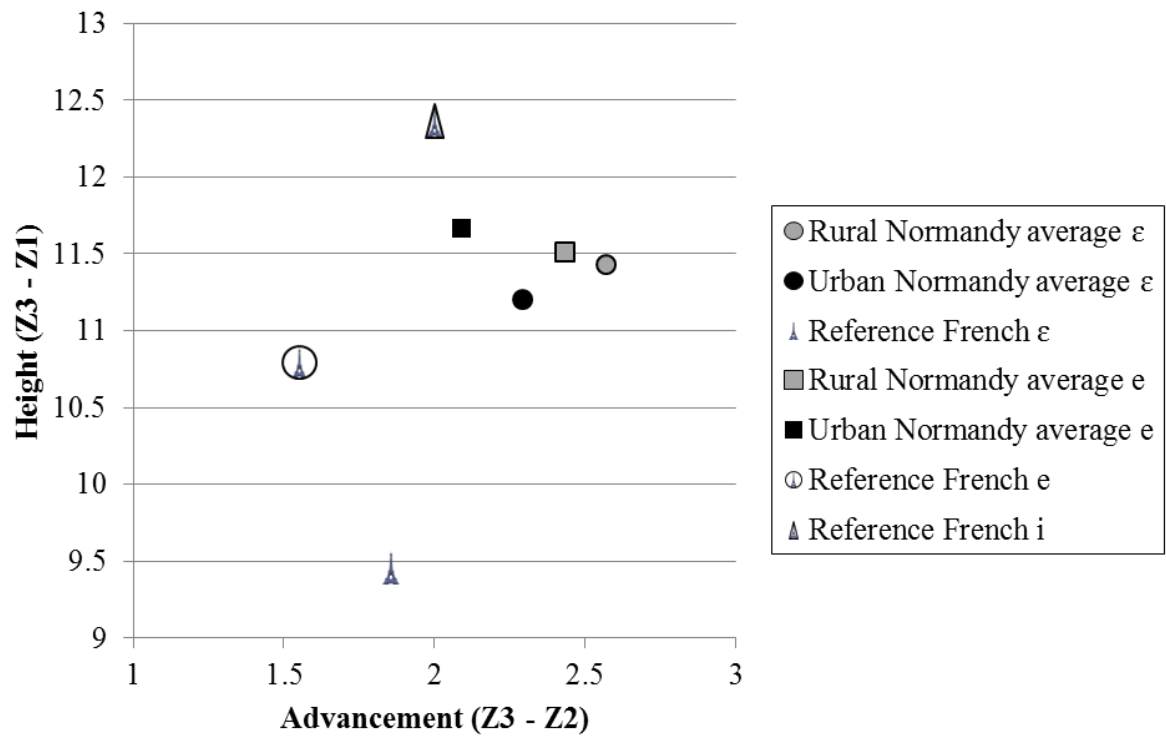


Figure 5: Proportions of merger of /ɛ/ and /e/ by age-group in Hall (2008)'s rural (left) and urban (right) sites.

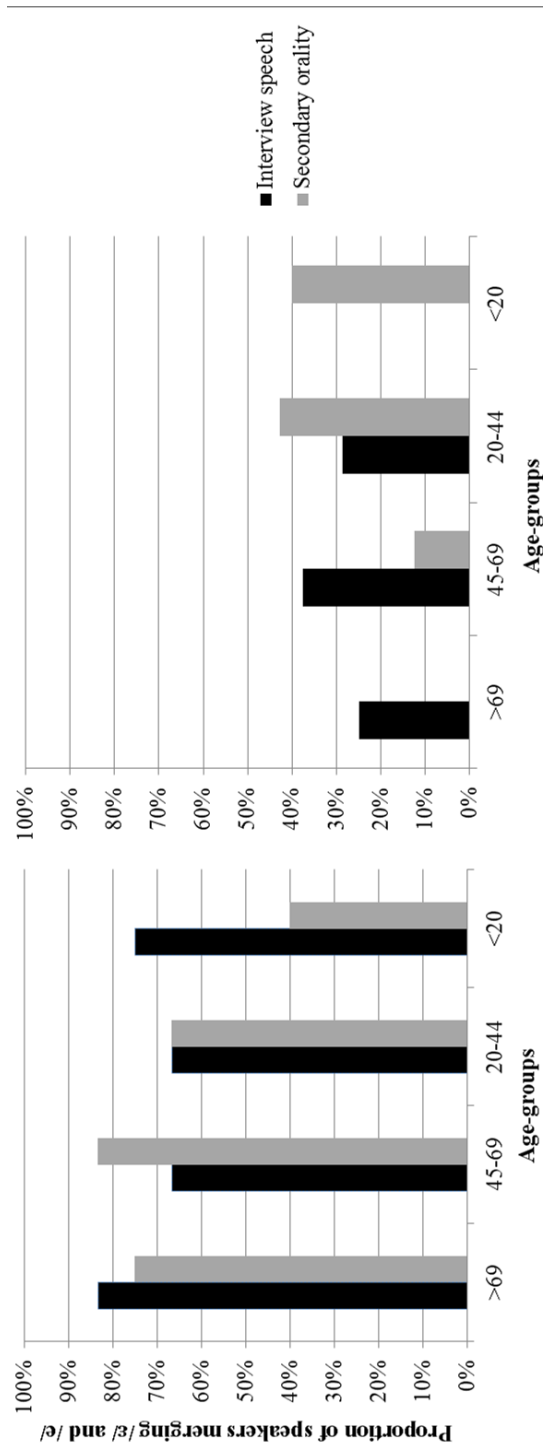
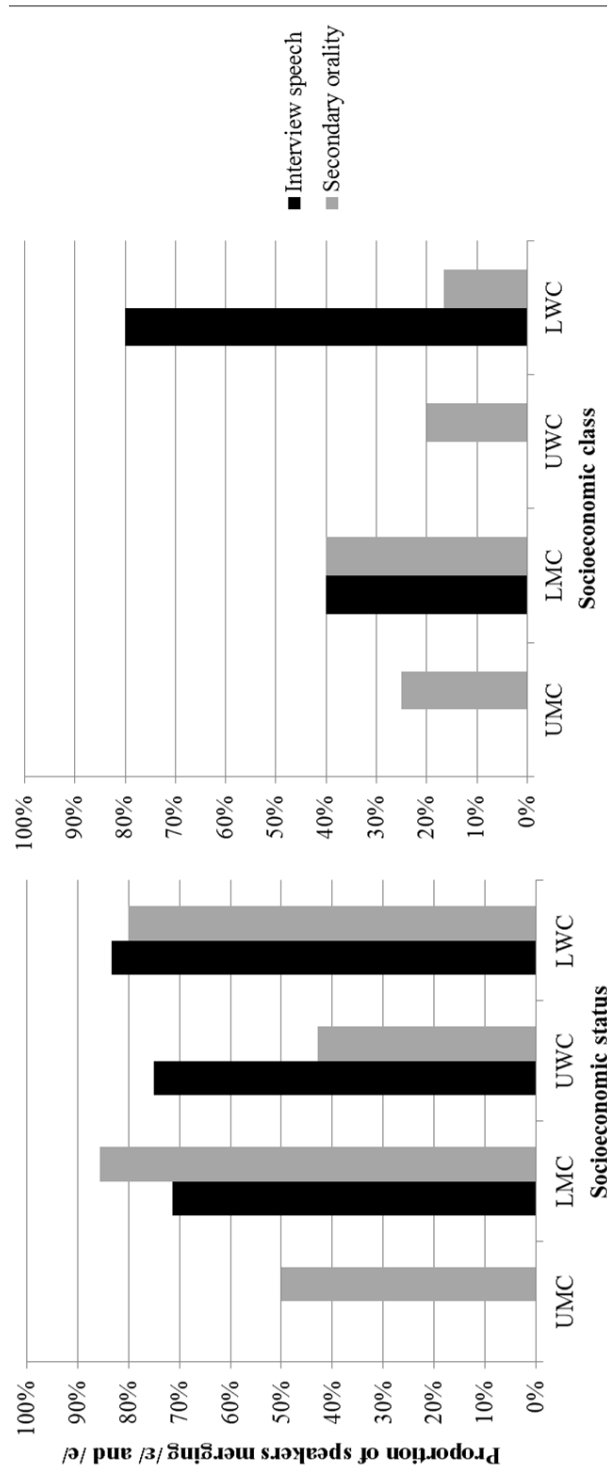


Figure 6: Proportions of merger of /ɛ/ and /e/ by socioeconomic status group in Hall (2008)'s rural (left) and urban (right) sites. UMC = Upper Middle Class; LWC = Lower Working Class; etc.



Tables

Table 1 Vowel tokens coded per speaker

Variable	(a)		(e)	
Phonemes	a	ɑ	ɛ	e
Interview style	30	30	30	30
Secondary orality	30	30	30	30
TOTAL per style	60		60	
GRAND TOTAL	120		120	

¹ The *langue d'oïl* varieties are those spoken in approximately the northern two-thirds of France, from which Standard French emerged. *Oïl* was the Old French word for 'yes', from which modern *oui* derives; in the south the form used was *Oc*, hence *langue d'oc*, from which the name of the Languedoc region originates.

² The closest comparable term is probably *Ch'ti-mi*, which refers both to inhabitants of the industrial Nord-Pas-de-Calais and to their speech varieties (see Pooley, 1996, p. 10).

³ 'Le féodalisme et la superstition parlent bas-breton, l'émigration et la haine de la République parlent allemand, la contre-révolution parle italien, et le fanatisme parle basque. Brisons ces instruments de dommage et d'erreur.'

⁴ Watson (2006; 2008) has even argued for divergent tendencies in Liverpool English which defy the recent trend towards RDL.

⁵ Now two regions, Basse-Normandie and Haute-Normandie (Lower Normandy and Upper Normandy).

⁶ For full details, see Hall (2008).

⁷ La Bonneville is in fact only one of the eleven villages which together make up the rural study-site, but we use the name of this one village to represent all of them, as a plurality of rural interviewees were from La Bonneville.

⁸ A French *canton* is a collection of neighbouring municipalities, especially useful when the municipalities were too small individually to support common public services, for example.

⁹ We follow the convention of labelling variables with round brackets (Labov, 1972, p. 11).

¹⁰ ‘[...] des différences, des “variantes” apparaissent dans un domaine linguistique dont les grandes lignes structurelles laissent pourtant nettement apparaître une unité fondamentale au milieu de ces diversités. C’est pourquoi il n’est nullement stupide d’évoquer la présence de “parlers” au sein d’une “langue régionale normande” ou, si l’on préfère, d’une entité linguistique normande.’

¹¹ The popular phonetic analysis software Praat has continued to develop, but we cite the version used for the analysis described here and in Hall (2008).

¹² ‘La bourgeoisie anglo-américaine fuyait les villes dans la mesure où les transports le permettaient ; l’Etat français a désindustrialisé les villes et en a chassé les ouvriers pour rendre les villes à la bourgeoisie’.

¹³ ‘From Clichy to cliché: six years on, the banlieues are still a world apart’

<http://www.economist.com/node/21532310> October 15 2011 (accessed 26 February 2014).

¹⁴ Perhaps for this reason, it is unsurprising that the French of the *banlieues* has attracted considerable interest from variationists in recent years: see, for example, Jamin (2005; 2009); Fagyal (2010), and Gadet (in press).

¹⁵ The symbols in this figure for the French and Canadian norms for /a/ and /ɑ/ are created from images available through Wikimedia Commons. The symbols for the French norms are created using an image of the Eiffel Tower by Rüdiger Völk (user ‘Paris 16’), file <Eiffel_blue.png>, under the Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 2.5 Generic

licence. The symbols for the Canadian norms are created using an image of a black maple leaf by user 'Andreas 06', file <Conservative_maple_leaf.svg>, under the Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence.